

## Books

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

THE rogues have it this month. The most consummate of them is the wisecracking Harry Bogen, hero of Jerome Weidman's *I Can Get It For You Wholesale* (Simon & Schuster, \$2), but old Charlie Squires, the wirepulling and hypocritical ex-Senator of Marquis W. Childs's *Washington Calling!* (Morrow, \$2.50) gives Harry a fairly close race for some of the way, at least. Both Mr. Weidman and Mr. Childs are deadpan artists, telling you the most horrifying things with the straightforward air of an Uncle Wiggly pontificating at the bedtime hour. There is no indignation, no moralizing, no intrusive point of view in either novel; nothing but pure narration. But of the authors' presence on the side of the angels you can have no doubt whatever; and if Mr. Childs seems, on reflection, to be a little more lenient than Mr. Weidman, if he seems a little too lenient in his smiling irony, you may put that down to the nature of Charlie Squires. Charlie is more deserving of charity than Harry Bogen. For, being sentimental and not wholly lost to pity, he would be incapable of Harry's final Nietzschean gesture, a gesture that sends a poor trusting dope to jail. The fact that Charlie's skulduggery, objectively considered, is of wider scope, involving as it does the ultimate spoliation of thousands, hardly makes any difference. Charlie can't see that spoliation; if he could, he wouldn't behave as he does. But Harry Bogen could see it and still smile and smile and smile and be a villain.

Mr. Weidman's story is something of a *tour de force*. It is all done in terms of an ordered internal monologue, with Harry Bogen reciting his own adventures and supplying his own justifications in a lingo that crackles with phrases that are nakedly alive. When Arthur Kober and Milt Gross write Bronx dumb-waiter Yiddish you sometimes suspect them of laying it on with a trowel. But Mr. Weidman's—or Mr. Bogen's—language comes rippling from

the page as though spoken naturally. When Harry himself is doing the talking or the thinking, the prose is devoid of the *gemütlich* warmth that one naturally associates with Hebrew-American argot. But so skillful is the twenty-four-year-old Mr. Weidman that when Harry is quoting Ma Bogen the talk becomes infused with warmth, with tender humor, and with a wise, ironic awareness that life is something that is never to be trusted. In other words, Mr. Weidman is an artist who can characterize people from the inside out.

What one misses in Mr. Weidman's story is a pity that would take the trouble to show you how Harry Bogen got that way in the first place. Surely some terrible inner urge for security, born of who knows what fear, must have driven Harry into becoming the smart, hard impresario who introduces a snide Broadway showman's tactics into the Seventh Avenue dress-goods business. Harry's sociological awareness (he knows enough about radicals to use them as dupes and stooges, laughing at their willingness "to die for dear old Stalin") is too complete to be the property of a man who began as a Machiavellian without interest in human values; he must at one time have had sensibility. Indeed, his suppressed interest in Ruthie Rivkin—whose character is such that she could only be called Ruthie even though her name is Betty—shows that he still has traces of it. But by the close of the book, when he is making a play for an actress and using his company's funds with a blithe disregard of the consequences, he is pretty well past redemption. The scene in which he shifts the onus of his speculations to his partner, poor Meyer Babushkin, is one of the most heart-wrenching in modern fiction. It made me feel bad for days.

Mr. Weidman promises us other books about Harry Bogen. We may count on their excellence. But looking forward to them is almost too much for human

frailty to bear. As Burton Rascoe points out, there is at least a touch of Harry Bogen in every man who has a living to make; hence, in looking at Harry Bogen, we are, to some extent, looking at ourselves. The glimpse is not reassuring. Now that Mr. Weidman has put Harry in amber for all time, now that he has shown us the acquisitive spirit at its lowest (Frank Cowperwood, Dreiser's go-getter, was a generous man compared to Harry), I would like to see him turn his prodigious talents to something else. Of one thing I am sure: Mr. Weidman will be neither a one-book man nor a one-milieu man. He can create new worlds as well as recall his own past: that is evident in every line of *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*.

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Marquis Childs's novel is infernally clever and beautifully stage-managed. If you know anything at all about Washington and national politics, you will try to read it as a *roman à clef*. But you will be exasperated trying to pin the characters down. Old Charlie Squires, with the beautiful daughter, vaguely recalls some one's description of Frank Mondell, who was once a member of Congress and later a Washington lawyer, but he obviously isn't Frank Mondell. The Esterbrook brothers, Fred and Will, who have rigged up a legal gadget to gain control of thousands of miles of railroad with a small initial investment, are the Van Sweringens, yet they aren't the Van Sweringens. Old Deltus Mayne, the incorruptible, is seemingly compounded of Carter Glass and George Norris—and until you realize how foolish it is to put Glass and Norris together, you think you have Mayne tagged. Jim Vargas, the boss, is Tom Pendergast of Kansas City plus some puzzling overtones of certain Chicago bosses. John Winthrop, the man in the White House with the Roman matron for a wife, is Franklin D. Roosevelt; of that there can be no doubt. But his good friend George Trevelyan is Felix Frankfurter

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wearing clothes for the Adams family or the Cabot Lodge family, an Austrian libertarian with a New England skin. And Ferris Branolsky, the *amicus curiae* who tries, unsuccessfully, to spoil Charlie Squires's game, is Mr. Justice Brandeis taken off the bench, given Bernard Baruch's money, and blended with the part of Felix Frankfurter that didn't go into Trevelyan. As for the young legation and State Department men, they are easily recognizable as types.

In dealing with type figures Marquis Childs is infinitely more sophisticated than a past generation of political novelist; he, a newspaperman writing his first novel, has turned out something that contrasts with Winston Churchill's *Mr. Crewe's Career* or Gertrude Atherton's *Senator North* as Napoleon brandy contrasts with Tennessee mountain corn. The gossip in *Washington Calling!* falls pat; the plot, showing the lines of force that compel Roosevelt—or Winthrop—to deal with the bold buccaneers of finance at least respectfully, in spite of hard words about economic royalists and money-changers, is entirely realistic, entirely credible. (In *Washington Calling!* Mammon gets his due, while the forces of righteousness get for a sop a Senate investigation into holding-company practices that will air a lot of dirty linen and clean very little of it.) The weak part of the novel is the love interest. Here boy meets girl in a romance that is a concession on Mr. Childs's part to the easy, if not the happy, end. The novel would have had more irony, more salt, if Darnell, old Charlie's beautiful daughter, had gone off to China with Ronny, the State Department boy whom she did not love, instead of meeting the heir to the Van Sweringen—pardon, the Esterbrook—fortune on the boat carrying Charlie and his hundred-thousand-dollar fee to Europe.

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*In the American Jungle: 1925-1936* (Farrar & Rinehart, \$2.50) is a selection made by Harold Clurman from Waldo Frank's essays, reviews, and speeches of the past twelve years. Nathan Asch's *The Road: In Search of America* (Norton, \$2.75) is the record of a four months' trip by bus from Washington to the Pacific Coast and back again. Burton Rascoe's *Before I Forget* (Doubleday, Doran, \$3) is an autobiography that carries its author from a small-town Kentucky childhood up to and through his career as literary editor of the *Chicago Tribune* when that paper was run by Joseph Medill Patterson, now publisher of the *New York Daily News*. The gulf between Rascoe and Frank is

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60 Fifth Avenue

New York

a wide one; that between Rascoe and Asch not so wide, but still gaping; yet each writer is, in his way, expressing what might be called the New Patriotism, an interest in and love for America that have nothing to do with armaments or the balance of trade or cash accretions for those who sit at the center of the web that is exposed by Marquies Childs.

Waldo Frank, self-conscious, the eternal pilgrim, yearns to possess the secret of America in his bones. Nathan Asch is less self-conscious, but he also does his share of yearning. Burton Rascoe, wholly unself-conscious, does no yearning whatsoever and is splendidly oblivious to secrets. Where Frank longs to be a prophet, Rascoe has no use for hieratic language or gestures, and he wouldn't have a disciple if you gave him one. It is puzzling to try to make up your mind which of these authors has the better understanding of America. Frank travels with Earl Browder, Communist candidate for president, goes to interview Trotsky, and generalizes about a Puritan-commercial culture in an essay on the physiognomy of Calvin Coolidge. Nathan Asch visits the Colorado sugar-beet pickers, the Arkansas sharecroppers and the lumberjacks of the Northwest, looking for signs of revolt. Rascoe, coming out of the midlands which both Frank and Asch seek to comprehend, lacks the desire to be revolutionist or martyr—and is therefore far closer to the average man upon whom the Messrs. Frank and Asch must depend for their revolution. Admittedly Rascoe doesn't think about the future. Yet this man who is not given to worry or heroics expresses the more completely what we like to think is the essential democracy of America—its hatred of pose and cant, its willingness to live and let live—without worrying about being representative. . . . Well, there's no use in playing one type off against the other, no use calling names. Both types, New York intellectual and Midwest naïf, have helped to create a modern American literature, and both types can be counted on to fight the Fascism which Frank and Asch stylize as the Enemy and which Rascoe would simply resent without stylizing it as anything.

Frank has recently been called a weak man by the Communists. Such an imputation is ridiculous, almost libelous. No man who is weak could go on presenting himself year after year as a mystic, a Spinozan intuitionist, a monist, in a pragmatic, pluralistic land; such swimming against the current takes sublime courage. In the essays about

places and people that go to make up *In the American Jungle* Frank often sounds portentous, often invites a snicker or a snort, but when you meet him and talk with him you know that he is humble. Those who say he lacks strength say the one thing that is completely untrue about him.

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Twenty years ago the United States went to war, thereby staving off a depression which caught up with us eventually in 1929. Just what we got out of the crusade, beyond a postponement and an intensification of something we had to face sometime anyway, has always been a mystery. In *The Tragic Fallacy: A Study of America's War Policies* (Knopf, \$4) Mauritz Hallgren quotes chapter, verse, and statistics to prove that our military men, our navalists, and our business interests are prepared to plunge us all over again into war beyond our borders. In *Neutrality for the United States* (Yale University Press, \$3.50) Edwin Borchard and William P. Lage

show, step by step, the blunders in negotiation and in the application of international law that committed Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of War—pardon me, Secretary of State—Lansing to siding actively with the Allies. Hallgren and the Messrs. Borchard and Lage complement each other, the one dwelling on economic factors, the others sticking to the legalistic and moral. Both books are necessary to a complete picture of the struggle between the forces of war and peace. And each raises the issue: "Why must we repeat our mistakes of the past?" The weakness of Hallgren is his Cassandra tone, a tone which is apt to rob his readers of their will to keep the United States at peace. The weakness of the Messrs. Borchard and Lage is that their emphasis on non-economic factors may cause their readers to overlook the possibility of hobbling the economic interests that would lead us into war. But Borchard and Lage are right about this: the will to peace must precede all else.

## Book Notes

Detective fiction has never been our weakness. Not because it isn't good enough. On the contrary. We have always been too prone, anyway, to hear the fire-escape window opening behind us as we lie reading in bed in the apartment alone. We have stumbled over many a corpse in the dark while fumbling in frantic hysteria for the electric switch. Any further stimulation of our imagination in such directions is not only unnecessary, but positively dangerous. We appreciate the fact that by turning our cowardly backs on this form of distraction we are missing some Great Experiences and that some of the best minds of our day are hopeless addicts. Paul Elmer More, for instance, managed to spare enough time from Plato and humanism to amass one of the finest collections of detective stories in the world. And he had read them, too, every one.

That leaves us pretty much nowhere and certainly in no position to recommend to real fans some of the best mysteries of the current season for vacation reading. . . . So it is with the greatest kind of pleasure that we have been able to get S. S. Van Dine to perform this service for us. The *Scribner's Recommends* list (see page 63) presents the ten best detective novels of the 1937 spring season, chosen and reviewed in brief by a man who has made and solved some of the greatest mysteries of our time.

Van Dine himself has had no new novel out this year, but it will be good news to every Philo Vance enthusiast that *The Powwow Murder Case* is scheduled to appear in October.

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Probably it can all be put down to differences in individual temperaments, but when we hear that Jerome Weidman, whose *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* has been bought by the public, acclaimed by the critics (see John Chamberlain in this issue), and read by almost everybody, works at a job during the day, studies law at night (God knows why, he says), and writes *in between times*, we feel anew a very smug and very unreasoning impatience with those who tell us that they can't write their novels because they've never been able to "get away somewhere and write." Psychologists would probably put our reactions down to the fact that we personally could never write a short story, let alone a novel, under any circumstances whatsoever. But isn't it true that if you have something really worth saying it is *bound* to come out whether you have a minute or twenty-four hours a day to write it in? Well, Jerome Weidman thinks a whole lot, too, about a whole lot of things. "I write in between times," he explains, "and most of the rest of the time, too, because I like it. I am losing my hair and my fear of putting things down on paper; I think

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